



Man and Machine: Airman shares 30-years of service with first KC-10

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3/9/2011 - **JOINT BASE MCGUIRE-DIX-LAKEHURST, N.J.** -- Aircraft 79-0434, the first KC-10 Extender delivered to the Air Force, landed at Barksdale Air Force Base, La., on March 17, 1981. At the same time, four hundred miles away, a young trainee enduring the rigors of basic training was unaware that his career - and his life - would be so deeply tied to that aircraft.

The KC-10 is closing in on its 30th year of providing air refueling and airlift for U.S. military operations across the globe. Few Airmen serving today are as connected to the KC-10's history as Senior Master Sgt. Bill Gross, a crew chief with the 714th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron here. His career has practically marched in lockstep with the aircraft known by the last three digits of its tail number - 434.

"This is a tanker that has served in just about every major military operation in the last 20 years," he said. "I am proud to have been the crew chief on such a historical and tenured war-fighting machine."

The early years

Before working on 434, Sergeant Gross served as an active-duty crew chief on a B-52 Stratofortress. Upon completing his initial enlistment, he left the Air Force and returned to his hometown in the suburbs of Chicago. However, he soon realized that his hometown had stayed the same, while he had changed.

"After being responsible for a multi-million dollar aircraft, going back to a childhood job seemed like a dead end," he said.

Knowing that aircraft maintenance was one of his personal strengths, Sergeant Gross searched for aviation-related career opportunities. He eventually learned that full-time KC-10 crew chiefs were needed in an Air Force Reserve unit at Barksdale AFB. He got the job and unpacked his Air Force uniforms for the first time in just over a year.

The unit was bringing in a lot of new aircraft maintenance personnel, and Sergeant Gross said he hadn't really considered which aircraft he'd be assigned to.

North Louisiana

Sergeant Gross said his time as an Air Reserve Technician at Barksdale was special, both personally and professionally. Not only did he raise his two children there, but he also made many strong relationships with his fellow Airmen.

Time and distance has made it difficult to maintain many of those relationships, but keeping in touch with one of his Barksdale buddies is no problem for Sergeant Gross - he just turns to his left. Chief Master Sgt. Todd Harris shares an office with Sergeant Gross. The chief said he clearly recalls his office mate's work ethic and dedication when he was a young noncommissioned officer.

"He took it to another level," Chief Harris said. "If you were going to be working on his aircraft, you had better keep it clean and do proper maintenance, or believe me, you would hear about it."

That level of dedication almost killed Sergeant Gross.



HICKAM AIR FORCE BASE, Hawaii -- Technical Sgt. Bill Gross, a KC-10 Extender crew chief, stands on the flightline here Dec. 7, 1991. Sergeant Gross was in Hawaii to help commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Sergeant Gross was the long-time crew chief assigned to the Air Force's first KC-10 and has been stationed with the aircraft for nearly his entire career. As the KC-10 celebrates its 30th year of Air Force service on March 17, 2011, Sergeant Gross can claim that he has been there every step of the way. (U.S. Air Force photo)

While working on 434 one day, he was informed of a storm that was quickly approaching Barksdale. He had been involved in heavy maintenance and the tanker was opened up, exposing some of its critical components. He couldn't let 434 face the storm in its current state. Sergeant Gross said that he rushed to prepare the jet, but he took just a little too long.

"This big boom happened, and the next thing I knew, I was in the back of a maintenance truck being taken to the emergency room," he recalled.

The lightning had struck the aircraft and surged through the crew chief, knocking him off his feet.

"Everyone always says that 434 and I are bonded for life because we got struck by lightning together," he said, but clarified the remark by saying, "It's not an experience I'd want to relive."

Going to war

Sergeant Gross recounted that just as he was reaching his prime as a hands-on crew chief in the late '80s, the KC-10 was reaching its prime as an operational asset for U.S. military operations.

Their timing couldn't have been much better, because tensions were escalating in the Persian Gulf. The Airman and the aircraft were given an opportunity to prove their capabilities in combat operations.

While much of the accolades for the initial stages of Operation Desert Shield go to F-15 fighter jets, Sergeant Gross said that the fighters, with their limited fuel capacity, could not have been in the fight without the support of their tankers.

"How do you think they got there?" he said.

Not quite the Jersey Shore, but close

After Iraq's military had been subdued during Operation Desert Storm, the KC-10s continued to rotate in and out of the Middle East in support of Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch. However, things were changing back home. The balance of the stateside fleet was leaving Barksdale for locations closer to the coast - Travis AFB, Calif., and McGuire AFB, N.J.

The reorganization had a significant impact on the Barksdale Airmen, many of whom were lifelong Louisiana residents. The Airmen were given a choice to follow the KC-10s to their new bases or to remain to work on the B-52s which were moving to Barksdale.

"We didn't really want to leave," Sergeant Gross said.

If he stayed at Barksdale, Sergeant Gross would be valuable due to his experience as former B-52 crew chief. But he had two important reasons to move to the Garden State. Since so many of his fellow unit members decided to remain at Barksdale, a move to McGuire AFB would open many promotion opportunities with much less experienced competition. Sergeant Gross had also grown attached to his airplane and wasn't ready to bid it farewell.

"It would have been hard," he said.

On October 1, 1994, aircraft 434 was the first KC-10 to be transferred to McGuire. Sergeant Gross was part of the crew that flew the tanker to its new home that day.

Aircraft 434 wasn't the first in everything it did. Sergeant Gross said that in one particular case, 434 was last. Air Mobility Command decided the KC-10's white-top paint scheme would be abandoned in favor of an all-grey scheme. Sergeant Gross thought 434 was fine as it was and he didn't really support the change.

He said he kept finding good excuses to keep the tanker out of the paint barn, and the strategy worked for a little while. However, he knew it was only a matter of time before the painters caught up with him.

"I told them that they might paint it grey," he said. "But it would have a big, white 'X' on top where I would lay while trying to stop them."

They ended up painting it while he was on leave, he said.

Still fighting

The KC-10 and its maintenance and operations personnel continued to support ongoing operations in the Middle East throughout the '90s, and just as the millennium was about to come to a close, Eastern Europe

erupted in violence. Sergeant Gross and 434 were called upon to serve their country overseas once again in support of Operation Allied Force. During the operation, 434 was able to demonstrate its versatility. Not only did the aircraft provide aerial refueling on several missions, but it also shuttled refugees from harm's way in Kosovo to safety in the United States.

As the new millennium arrived, the KC-10's services were still in high demand. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the crew chief and his tanker deployed in support of multiple operations throughout the Middle East.

Prying the wrench from his white-knuckled grip

Though Sergeant Gross and 434 had been brothers in arms for many years, job promotions would eventually take him away from his role as the tanker's primary caretaker.

He became a production superintendent, meaning he was the shift leader who cruised the flightline in a pick-up truck while coordinating the all the squadron's on-aircraft maintenance activities. His duties as a pro super kept him close to the aircraft and to the Airmen who replaced him, but he missed doing the job himself.

"My coworkers always tell me it's time to move on," he said. "But I'm a wrench turner at heart."

Sergeant Gross said that it took some effort to not give special attention to 434 and to focus on the maintenance status of all the KC-10s equally. Occasionally, he'd even jump out of his truck for a few minutes to lend a hand and a word of advice to the Airmen who were working on his jet.

"He tries very hard to share his knowledge and experiences with the young Airmen and pass on his pride of the KC-10," Chief Harris said. "When he hears maintainers referring to 434 on the radio, he often chimes in with a sometimes-unconventional suggestion that reflects one of the aircraft's quirks."

The next promotion would take Sergeant Gross away from 434 and the flightline altogether and into his current position as a desk-bound flight chief. Initially, the new job was tough because he no longer works on aircraft - he works on Airmen. He didn't start to feel comfortable in the flight chief position until he was advised to think of personnel and administrative issues like aircraft maintenance issues.

Sergeant Gross has since warmed to his position as flight chief, but Chief Harris knows that his old friend would trade in his keyboard for a wrench in a heartbeat.

"To this day, 434 is the number-one thing on his mind," the Chief said. "When anyone mentions 434, his ears perk up."

Sergeant Gross doesn't deny the Chief's description.

"I still have a personal dedication to the aircraft," Sergeant Gross said.

Retirement on the horizon

Aircraft 434, like most KC-10s, are projected to serve through 2043. Sergeant Gross, however, has just a few years of service left before reaching his mandatory retirement date.

"There will never be another KC-10 crew chief who takes more pride in his aircraft than Sergeant Gross," Chief Harris said. "It will be a sad day for the Air Force and the KC-10 when he finally hangs up his uniform for the last time."

Sergeant Gross acknowledges his connection to 434, but insists that many other Airmen have helped keep the tanker in a mission-ready state through its thirty years of service.

"That aircraft has a lot of history," he said. "A lot of people have worked on it and bled on it."

Though the next generation of Airmen will continue to work and bleed on 434, none will be able to claim a career that was so deeply linked to one airplane like Sergeant Gross.

"One day, I hope to take my grandchildren to a museum or a base where they will eventually retire 434 upon a block of concrete, dedicating it forever as the first KC-10 delivered to the Air Force," Sergeant Gross said. "And maybe, just maybe, some historian will put my name in the crew chief block, and I can say to them that I was the crew chief for that airplane."